This is a pre-copy-editing, author-produced PDF of an article accepted for publication in *Notes and Queries* following peer review. The definitive publisher-authenticated version—'Notes on the Religious Element in *Hamlet*', *Notes and Queries* 64.2 (2017): 274-278, is available online at: https://doi.org/10.1093/notesj/gjx039.

NOTES ON THE RELIGIOUS ELEMENT IN HAMLET

Although Shakespeare's Hamlet is now widely acknowledged to be pervaded by references and allusions to matters of religious doctrine and controversy, discussion on their overall import continues. The following notes seek to identify or clarify several such references and allusions. They generally do not replicate information readily available in the established literature, but do draw attention to some neglected or controversial previous commentary.

I

HORATIO By heaven, I charge thee speak.
MARCELLUS
It is offended.
BARNARDO See, it stalks away.
HORATIO
Stay, speak, speak, I charge thee speak. (I.i.48–50)[1]

The possibility that the apparition is offended at being invoked by heaven, as suggested by Prosser, has been dismissed or ignored.[2] Of potential interest here is that in Q1 this invocation is repeated as the apparition is stalking away from the stage: 'Stay, speak, speak, by heaven I charge thee, speak' (i.40, emphasis mine). This could be due to a number of reasons—for one thing, the addition of three syllables renders the line metrical—but the point may well be to emphasize the precise cause of the offence. If so, this would parallel the apparition's other two exits in Act I, both occurring in response to specifically religious promptings: the crowing of the cock—the symbol of Christ, as various analogues demonstrate, and as Horatio's and Marcellus' explanations all but explicitly indicate (I.i.146–164)—and the approach of morning prayer or 'matin' (I.v.89). As further discussed in note

VIII below, this would not be the only place where Q1 is more explicit on religious matters than Q2 and F.

With respect to the exit at cock-crow, one of the recognized analogues is Prudentius' 'Hymn at Cock-Crow', but it has not yet been suggested that this might be the specific source for some details in the Hamlet passage. The following lines, and especially the first, seem of interest:

> ferunt vagantes daemonas
> laetos tenebris noctium
> gallo canente exterritos
> sparsim timere et cedere[3]

Prudentius' ferunt, 'they say', is similar to the repeated qualifications in Shakespeare's passage—'I have heard', 'Some say', 'So have I heard', and especially Marcellus' 'then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad' (I.i.148, 157, 160, 164)—while Horatio's 'Th'extravagant and erring spirit' (I.i.153) might carry an echo of Prudentius' 'vagantes daemonas'.

II

> confined to fast in fires (I.v.11)

Thus Q2, F; Q1 'confined in flaming fire' (v.4). Is the reference to fasting meant as another in a series of Catholic tell-tales, along with allusions or references to purgatory ('Doomed for a certain term . . . / Till the foul crimes . . . / Are burnt and purg'd away', I.v.10–13, 'by Saint Patrick . . . / It is an honest ghost', I.v.135–137), the Harrowing of Hell (see following note), the sacraments of deathbed confession and extreme unction ('Unhouseled, disappointed, unaneled', I.v.77), and the churchyard prayer ('Hic et ubique?', I.v.156), among others? A summary of the confessional differences with regard to fasting appears in the note to Isaiah 58:5 in the Douay-Rheims Bible:

> Fasting is so often & clerly commended in holie Scriptures, that Protestantes (though not greatly affected therto) confesse it to be a good thing of it self, but in diuers respects detract much from it: denying it to be an act of religion, but only of bodily mortification: neither do al generally allow of prescript times, nor of abstinence from

flesh those dayes, vvhich they thinke good to fast: and those vvhich do abstaine from flesh, say they do it not for religion, but for the ordinance of ciuil policie.[4]

Accordingly, contemporary English Protestant works on the subject criticize the sundrie abuses of fasting in three generations of hypocrites, 'fastes held in the time of poperie and ignorance, . . . both ignorantly imposed vpon mens consciences, and also verie superstitiously obeied', 'the Popish and Antichristian fast', and so on.[5] Theobald notes here that 'it is a common saying of the Romish Priests to their People, If you won't fast here, you must fast in Fire'.[6] Limited efforts have not uncovered another instance of such a saying, but similar ones, deriving from the account of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19–31, do occur.[7]

III

harrow up thy soul (I.v.16)

The allusion to the Harrowing of Hell, a traditional doctrine dependent on those of purgatory or limbus patrum was apparently first recognized in the eccentric but often insightful study by Arthur McGee.[8] More recently, the possibility is independently, and tentatively, entertained by Thompson and Taylor in their note to Horatio's 'It harrows me with fear and wonder' (I.i.43; cross-referenced with the note to I.v.16): 'OED . . . implies that there is no direct connection with "the harrowing of hell", where "harrow" derives from "to harry" (to raid or despoil), but, given the context of Shakespeare's usages, there might have been a link in his mind.' The reticence seems warranted with regard to Horatio's line, but unwarranted with regard to the apparition's 'harrow up thy soul', where the rare phrasal form ('harrow up'), in combination with this particular object ('harrow up thy soul'), makes the allusion unmistakable. Among English Protestants, the controversy on Christ's descent into Hell—the traditional idea of the Harrowing of Hell was uniformly rejected, but there were differences as to which alternative position should be adopted—reached its peak precisely at the time of Hamlet.[9]

IV

virtue, as it never will be mov'd,
Though lewdness court it in a shape of heaven,

So lust, though to a radiant angel link'd,
Will sate itself in a celestial bed (I.v.53–56)

The two biblical passages alluded to here are commonplaces of the period's demonological learning: Galatians 1:8, 'But though that we, or An Angell from heauen preache vnto you otherwise, then that which we haue preached vnto you, let him be accursed', and 2 Corinthians 11:14, 'Satan him selfe is transformed into an Angel of light'.[10] Multiple examples are found in Lavater's demonology: 'Saynte Paule to the Galathians the firste Chapter, sayth in great eanest [sic] vnto them, that if an Angell come from Haeuen, and preache vnto them any other Gospell, hee shoulde be accursed. Euen so, if at thys tyme spirites appeare, and doe vtter any thyng repugnant to the Doctrine of the Apostles and Prophetes, they are to be reiected'; 'But thou doest demand whether the Diuell can represente the lykenesse of some faithfull man deceased? Hereof we neede not doubt at all. For in the seconde Corin. 11. Saincte Paule witnesseth, that Sathan transformeth hym selfe into the shape and fashion of an Angell of light'.[11] The apparition taunts the prince by placing in his immediate reach the very biblical proofs which, were he able to recognize them, and were he sufficiently lucid to apply them to the present situation, would unmistakably alert him to its demonic nature.

V

howsomever thou pursues this act,
Taint not thy mind nor let thy soul contrive
Against thy mother aught; leave her to heaven (I.v.84–86)

The forbearance towards Gertrude was the single argument against identifying the apparition as demonic in an influential article by Richard H. West: 'Pneumatology attributes many sleights to devils, but never the sleight of prescribing Christian forbearance.'[12] Apart from this one element, West conceded, the devil theory could be argued 'in detail . . . from specifically pneumatological evidence'. Apparently West's reputation in this field discouraged others from questioning this claim, but the fact is that this tactic—doing some good to do more evil—is commonly attributed to the devil and his minions. We need not look further than Shakespeare's own Banquo, who knows that

oftentimes to win us to our harm
The instruments of darkness tell us truths,
Win us with honest trifles to betray's
In deepest confidence. (Macbeth, I.iii.121–124)

For a specifically demonological parallel, see Lavater's ch. XVIII, on how Diuels doe sometimes bid men doe those things vvhich are good, and auoide things that are euill: sometimes they tell truth, and for vvwhat cause, where it is noted explicitly that the devil may exhort not merely to good, but specifically Christian behaviour: 'pray earnestly, come to Churche often &c.' What reason is there to presume that this does not extend to the forbearance urged towards Gertrude?

VI

the matin (I.v.89)

Editors have tended to gloss this as simply a poetic expression for 'morning' or 'dawn', and the *OED* entry on matins quotes this verse as the first and only early example of the non-religious sense 5, 'A morning' (the other two examples are from the mid-nineteenth century). Thompson and Taylor note that 'This is Shakespeare's only use of the word matin and it may be chosen for its religious connotations, "matins" being a church service that takes place in the morning'. Matin/s more specifically is morning prayer. In the *OED,* this sense (1.c) is erroneously said to be 'App. rare before the 19th cent. The service so named in the first Book of Common Prayer was referred to as morning prayer in the 1552 and later versions'. In spite of this, matin/s continued to be used synonymously with morning prayer.[13] As noted above in relation to Horatio's invocation 'by heaven', all three of the apparition's departures from the stage in Act I occur in reaction to specifically religious promptings.

VII

Ha, ha, boy; truepenny; old mole; worthy pioner (I.v.150–162)

It is now well-established that Hamlet adopts the manner and language of the Vice, and addresses the apparition below the stage by such humorous appellations as the Vice uses of

the devil. With the sarcastic use of 'truepenny'—'A trusty person, an honest fellow' (OED)— compare Nashe's Almond for a Parrat, Marston's Malcontent (echoing Hamlet), and Shakespeare's own Feste, who, impersonating the Vice, addresses his 'dad' as 'goodman devil' (Twelfth Night, IV.ii.132–134).[14] There are also additional analogues for 'old mole' and 'worthy pioner'.[15] The real giveaway, however, is the collocation, 'old mole': compare 'old truepenny' in Marston and Nashe, and see the OED entry for devil, 1.a, addressed 'in popular or rustic speech by many familiar terms as Old Nick, Old Simmie, Old Clootie, Old Teaser, the Old One, the Old lad, etc.' When the line is echoed in John Ford's 'Tis Pity She's a Whore—'Work you that way, old mole?' (II.ii.147)—it is in reference to the villainous Hippolita, called 'mistress she-devil' (IV.i.69) later on in the play, and is made precisely in regard to Hippolita's attempt to enlist Vasquez into one the play's multiple revenge plots.[16] The practice of Roman Catholic exorcists to address the devil by insulting 'nicknames' is described in a 1584 work by the Italian friar Girolamo Menghi (Hieronymus Mengus), partly quoted and translated in Samuel Harsnett's Declaration of egregious Popish Impostures. Although Harsnett's Declaration was identified as a Shakespearean source by Theobald, and has been discussed in relation to a number of Shakespeare's works, including Hamlet, this passage, offering the closest parallel to Hamlet's expressions in the so-called 'cellarage scene', has apparently gone unremarked:

> Now if you wil learne to nick-name the deuil in print, and cum priuilegio, vnder the signet, and seale of the holy Church at Rome: take heere a messe of nick-names, as they are dressed, and serued in from the Popes Maister-Cooke, and scalder for hel: and let hel it selfe be raked, you shal neuer finde the like: . . . Heare therfore thou sencelesse false lewd spirit, maister of deuils, miserable creature, tempter of men, deceauer of bad Angels, defrauder of soules, Captaine of Heretiques, father of lyes, fatuous, bestial, Ninnie, drunkard, infernall theefe, wicked serpent, rauening Wolfe, leane hunger-bitten impure Sow, seely beast, truculent beast, cruell beast, bloody beast, beast of all beasts, the most bestiall, Acherontall spirit, smoakie spirit, Tartareous spirit.[17]

Although these expressions are not attributed to the character of the Vice, it is worth noting that this passage appears in close proximity to Harsnett's description of the 'pretty part in the old Church-playes, when the nimble Vice would skip vp nimbly like a Iacke an Apes into the

deuils necke, and ride the deuil a course, and belabour him with wooden dagger, til he made him roare, wheat the people would laugh to see the deuil so vice-haunted'.[18]

VIII

> To die, to sleep—is that all? Ay, all.
> No, to sleep, to dream—ay, marry, there it goes,
> For in that dream of death, when we're awaked
> And borne before an everlasting judge
> From whence no passenger ever returned—
> The undiscovered country, at whose sight
> The happy smile and the accursed damned. (Q1, vii.116–122)

Apparently it is has not yet been noted that the eschatology of the famous soliloquy, especially in the Q1 variant, is informed by the doctrine of soul sleeping, and specifically its 'psychopannychist' variety: the belief that after its separation from the body, the soul, precisely as Hamlet describes, enters an unconscious state, most often referred to as 'sleep', and remains in this state until 'awaked' to be tried at the Last Judgment. In this, 'psychopannychism' differs from the more radical 'mortalist' doctrines of 'thnetopsychism', according to which the soul temporarily died along with the body until both were resurrected at the Last Judgment, and especially 'annihilationism', which denied the resurrection of the body as well as of the personal soul, allowing only impersonal immortality—the restoration of the life essence, purged of individual identity, to its divine source.[19] All three doctrines sought to accommodate the relevant biblical passages, and all three dispensed categorically with purgatory and the rest of Roman Catholic eschatology, but only 'psychopannychism' retained the continued immortality of the personal soul. The doctrine was embraced by Martin Luther, found support in early English Reformers like William Tyndale and John Frith, and retained a presence in England in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth century, especially with certain nonconformist groups such as the Anabaptists, but was consistently denounced as heretical by Church of England orthodoxy, and English translations of anti-'mortalist' treatises by John Calvin and Heinrich Bullinger were printed several times in the sixteenth century.

Hamlet's notions of sleeping and waking (in Q1), and the explicit reference to his 'immortal' soul (in all three texts: Q1, iv.40–50; Q2, I.iv.66–67; F, I.iv.45–46), are perfectly

in line with the 'psychopannychist' eschatology. The Q2/F version of the soliloquy is less explicit, but the phrases 'to die: to sleep' and 'sleep of death', along with the 'dreams' metaphor—'dreams' as something which interrupts the 'sleep of death' and 'give[s] . . . pause' to our scruples—still recognizably reflect Hamlet's acceptance of the doctrine:

> to die: to sleep—
> To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there's the rub,
> For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
> When we have shuffled off this mortal coil
> Must give us pause (III.i.63–67)

Ball actually quotes this familiar variant of Hamlet's soliloquy as an example of the conventional, merely metaphorical image of death as sleep, albeit one 'conveniently ambiguous' in contexts dealing with the soul-sleeping eschatologies.[20] Evidently Ball is unaware of the Q1 variant. While comparable passages elsewhere in Shakespeare's work may be purely metaphorical—Prospero's 'life . . . rounded with a sleep' (The Tempest, IV.i.157–178), for example, or Richard III's claim that 'The sons of Edward sleep in Abraham's bosom' (Richard III, IV.iii.38)—the Q1 soliloquy, with its explicit description of being 'awaked' from the 'dream of death' to be 'borne before an everlasting judge', leaves no room for ambiguity, and also enables us to see the less explicit Q2/F version in its true light. Without entering the question of the relationship between the texts, we may compare here the situation with Q1's 'predestinate' (xvii.45) against Q2/F's 'special providence' (V.ii.197–8/V.ii.167–168): 'special' is less explicit, but may still be interpreted to mean, precisely, 'predestinate'. Hamlet's anxious acceptance of soul-sleeping places him at odds with Church of England orthodoxy, and adds to the store of his 'Lutheran' and 'Puritan' associations, raising questions to be explored elsewhere in greater depth.[21]

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[1] Hamlet is quoted from the three-text edition of Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London, 2006), and unless otherwise noted, Q2 is cited. Shakespeare's other works are quoted from The Complete Works, gen. ed. Gary Taylor and Stanley Wells, 2nd edn (Oxford, 2005).

[2] Eleanor Prosser, Hamlet and Revenge, 2nd edn (Stanford, 1971), 98–9.

[3] Prudentius, trans. H. J. Thomson, 2 vols (London, 1949), I, 8–9: 'They say that evil spirits which roam happily in the darkness are terrified when the cock crows, and scatter and flee in fear.' Prudentius' Hymns were an Elizabethan school text: see the references in William Baldwin, William Shakspere's Small Latine & Lesse Greeke, 2 vols (Urbana, IL, 1944).

[4] The Holie Bible (Douay, 1609–10).

[5] Henry Holland, The Christian Exercise of Fasting (London, 1596); Nicholas Bownd, The Holy Exercise of Fasting (Cambridge, 1604); George Downame, Of the Christian exercise of Fasting, in The Christians Sanctvarie (London, 1604).

[6] The Works of Shakespeare, ed. Lewis Theobald, 7 vols (London, 1733).

[7] See William Bullein, A newe booke Entituled the Gouernment of Healthe (London, [1558]), sig. A6r: 'vnsatiat glottons shall faste in hell'; John Smith, Essex Dove (London, 1629), sig. C7v: 'for his feasting on earth, hee was saine to fast in hell'.

[8] The Elizabethan Hamlet (New Haven, 1985), 65. On the doctrine, see Karl Tamburr, The Harrowing of Hell in Medieval England (Cambridge, 2007).

[9] See Dewey D. Wallace, Jr., 'Puritan and Anglican: The Interpretation of Christ's Descent into Hell in Elizabethan Theology', Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte, lxix (1978), 248–87; Peter Marshall, Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England (Cambridge, 2002), 192–4.

[10] I quote from the first English printing of the Geneva: The Bible and Holy Scriptvres Conteined in the Olde and Nevve Testament (London, 1576). On Shakespeare's familiarity with the Geneva version, see Naseeb Shaheen, Biblical References in Shakespeare's Plays (Newark, DE, 1999), 38–48.

[11] Lewes [i.e., Ludwig] Lavater, Of ghostes and spirites walking by nyght, trans. R[obert] H[arrison] (London, 1572), sig. Cc1v, S2v–3r; cf. sig. R2r–v, X2r, Y2v, Bb4r.

[12] 'King Hamlet's Ambiguous Ghost', PMLA, lxx (1955): 1107–17, at 1100.

[13] See The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662, ed. Brian Cummings (Oxford, 2011), 810.

[14] See [Thomas Nashe], An Almond for a Parrat (London, [1589?]), sig. B4v: 'the good olde true-pennie Marprelate . . . sits ruminating vnder an oake'—cf. here the ballad The Devil's Oak (London, 1685)—'or in the bottome of a haystacke, whose bloud shall be first spilte in the reformation of the Church'; John Marston, The Malcontent, ed. W. David Kay, 2nd edn (London, 1998): 'Illo, ho, ho, ho! Art there, old true-penny? . . . I see flattery in thine eyes and damnation i' thy soul. Ha, ye huge rascal! . . . How does the Devil go with thee, now?' (III.iii.38–43).

[15] See The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden, trans. Denis Searby, intro. and notes Bridget Morris, 4 vols (Oxford, 2006–15), III, 61: 'What does the mole burrowing in the earth symbolize if not the devil who burrows about unseen and upsets the soul?'; John Melton, Astrologaster (London, 1620), sig. L1r, aligning the four devils of fire, air, water, and earth, with the salamander, the chameleon, the herring, and the mole; Walter Charleton, The Darkness of Atheism Dispelled (London, 1652), sig. Bb1v: 'that subterraneous Mole, the Devil'.

[16] 'Tis Pity She's a Whore, ed. Sonia Massai (London, 2011). Massai notes several other parallels with Hamlet (see esp. her notes to IV.ii.13–21, IV.iii.148–149, and V.iv.35–37). In addition, there is at least one further general parallel—Garibaldi's mistaken killing of Bergetto and his subsequent apology for it, strikingly reminiscent of Hamlet's killing of Polonius and his equally unsatisfactory apology to Laertes—and another specific verbal echo: 'Be ruled: you sha' not go' (V.iii.59); cf. Hamlet, I.iv.81, 'Be ruled, you shall not go.'

[17] Samuel Harsnett, A Declaration of egregious Popish Impostures (London, 1603), sig. P4v–Q1r; cf. Hieronymus Mengus, Fvstis daemonvm (Bologna, 1584), sig. Q3r–4r.

[18] Harsnett, Declaration, sig. Q1v–2r.

[19] See Norman T. Burns, Christian Mortalism from Tyndale to Milton (Cambridge, MA, 1972); Bryan W. Ball, The Soul Sleepers: Christian Mortalism from Wycliffe to Priestley (Cambridge, 2008). As both authors observe, the received terminology is fraught with inconsistencies, but the principal conceptual distinctions are clear.

[20] Soul Sleepers, 57, n. 2.

[21] For Hamlet's 'Lutheran' and 'Puritan' features, see, among others, Raymond B. Waddington, 'Lutheran Hamlet', English Language Notes, xxvii (1989), 27–42, and Richard C. Hassel, Jr., 'The Accent and Gait of Christians: Hamlet's Puritan Style', Religion and the Arts, vii (2003), 103–27.